

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
OPENING STATEMENT FOR NPOESS HEARING
November 16, 2005

I want to welcome everyone this morning to this important hearing on the NPOESS satellite program, a vital, but troubled effort that we desperately need to get back on track.

We hope to have a detailed discussion this morning of what's gone wrong with the program and how to fix it. But before we get into the potentially confusing specifics of acronyms and dates and bureaucratic structure, I want to remind everyone how much is at stake.

NPOESS is an absolutely essential program for the safety and security of the United States. Without polar satellites, we pretty much lose the ability to understand longer-term weather trends, and our knowledge of those trends can save lives. The specifics of NPOESS may be technical and abstruse, but this is a program that provides information that average Americans use in their daily lives – and information that may be needed to save their lives. This is not an abstract matter.

You would think that, given how much is riding on NPOESS, that this would be an especially closely supervised, well managed program. You would think that, given the cost and prominence of NPOESS, that this would be a program in which Congress was given clear, accurate and timely information to help keep the program adequately funded and on track.

But none of this has been the case. It is now clear that, almost from the outset, decisions were made with too little analysis of the technical challenges involved in building NPOESS. It is clear that contracts were awarded at prices that did not take into account the technical risks the program faced. And it is clear that the program was inadequately supervised, allowing problems to fester and worsen before being addressed. What's not so clear is whether these inadequacies are behind us, and that's part of what we will focus on today.

It's also clear that NOAA, in particular, has repeatedly withheld critical information from this Committee and the American people. Even in today's prepared testimony, NOAA is less direct and forthright in its assessment of the program and its options than are the other witnesses. This is absolutely unacceptable.

The American taxpayer is now going to pay as much as \$9 billion, maybe even more, for the NPOESS satellites at a time of fiscal stringency. Congress has to fully understand the costs of this program and the options for how the program can proceed. Ultimately, it is Congress that decides how much the nation can spend on NPOESS and what it will get for its money. No one is helped if we have to do that "in the dark."

And so today, we are going to closely review the options for getting the NPOESS program back on track. I know that the agencies and contractors are still in the process of reviewing those options. That is not a reason to avoid a full and open discussion today – before final decisions are made. For too long, Congress has been given information only after decisions have been made.

No one on our panel today should think that this Committee will accept answers at this hearing like “we are reviewing our options” or “we don’t have all the information yet.” You can qualify your answers with phrases like that, but you will not be allowed to simply avoid answering the fundamental questions before us.

One of those questions is why the agencies are not now considering putting more money into this program this year and next year instead of waiting until fiscal 2008. Such a strategy will add to launch delays, increase total costs, and possibly complicate efforts to get the sensors working properly. As far as I can tell, the only thing fiscal 2008 has to recommend itself, is that it isn’t here yet. I don’t think anyone believes that the federal government will be flush with cash in fiscal 2008.

As I said at our hearing on NASA, “wait til next year” is a good mantra for baseball fans, but it’s a lousy strategy for budgeting. So we’re going to pursue the question of funding forcefully today.

I hope we will come away from this hearing with a clear understanding of what the options are for the future of NPOESS, of how and when they will be fully evaluated, and of how this Committee will be kept informed of that information. We are going to be following this program like hawks, and we do not want to learn of decisions after they are made.

Today should be – had better be – the start of a new era for the NPOESS program – an era that will be characterized by close program management and a free flow of information. This should not be one in a series of hearings on what went wrong with NPOESS. We need to set out a plan today to put NPOESS back on track because lives are at stake.